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Supporting Desert Storm

Inside a J-2 Joint Intelligence Center

Brigadier General Charles W. Thomas, USA*The following article is based on an interview with the author, who was the Director of the CENTCOM J-2 Joint Intelligence Center (JIC) during Operation Desert Storm.*

The JIC's primary purpose was to provide tailored, all-source intelligence to the Commander in Chief of CENTCOM in Riyadh, before and during actual hostilities. CENTCOM had a JIC for a long time, certainly before Operation Desert Shield began. But when I arrived as part of a Military Intelligence Board team in November 1990, expansion of the 23-member element was under consideration. The team recommended that the JIC be expanded substantially. By the time I returned in January 1991, it had grown to 107 people. It was staffed almost entirely by original JIC members from the CENTCOM staff and by large numbers of augmentees, like me, brought in because of their expertise from reserve and active duty units all over the continental US and Europe.

The JIC served as the theatre's single focal point for analysis as well as for collection management, production, dissemination, and tailored intelligence, even though those functions were not specifically incorporated in the JIC's structure. They were sort of outside of it. But as the JIC Director, I coordinated those functions as well as pure analytical functions.

The idea was to give the J-2 the ability to depict accurately the current enemy situation. Before the formation of the enhanced JIC, CENTCOM operated under a federated concept. Because the CENTCOM J-2 had been so small, much of its intelligence analysis mission was delegated to the components, such as air analysis to the Air Force and ground OB analysis to the Army.

Organization

There was a current intelligence element built on the original JIC. It was a fairly large cell, including sections for air, ground and naval forces. It also included a shop which dealt exclusively with the Scud-hunting problem. The current intelligence element was the organization with which

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There was a section, separate from the current intelligence element, which primarily consisted of officers with the unique capability to write papers based on long-term assessments of issues like "what did the Iranians propose to do with the Iraqi aircraft they had sequestered?" or, "If we were going to change the strategy for our left hook in western Iraq, what would be [Iraq's] response?"

The third section within the JIC was the battle-damage assessment (BDA) cell. It was quite small at the start, but it expanded rapidly as we tried to get a handle on BDA.

The JIC took data provided by collectors at the theater level, by components, and data provided by national collectors, and it developed a current intelligence product that was briefed to the CINC daily. The same intelligence flowed into the long-term assessment section.

Analysis drove the collection-management function. Although not purely a part of the JIC, the collection-management section determined collection requirements based exclusively on contributions from the JIC and the components.

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Handling Requirements

The JIC had the flexibility to meet changing mission requirements. For example, the Scud mission was given a fairly high level of importance from the outset. We had a dedicated Scud search cell (for lack of a better term) before the ground campaign, when the air campaign and Scud launches began. But we increased our emphasis on that. This cell of two to three people working day and night was not adverse to looking at virtually any suggestion made for finding Scuds. It met with remarkably little success, considering the amount of effort expended.

One way we handled changing mission requirements was to "task organize" analysts as required. The use of our large current intelligence air desk is a good example. By Day 3 of the air campaign, with enemy air defenses badly suppressed and the Iraqi Air Force incapable of offering much opposition, we started shifting some of the analysts from the air desk to other sections, such as the Scud-hunting desk and the long-term assessments team, where there were greater requirements. We had enough talented resources that we could "mix and match," when necessary.

The JIC's targeting activity shifted when the coalition moved from Desert Shield to Desert Storm, in the sense that there always was a phased targeting effort. During Desert Shield, it was part of the planning process. The targets were divided into 13 categories, almost all of what we called a "strategic" nature from our theater perspective. These targets were defined in a joint effort between CINCCENT and the Department of Defense. Targeting depended on national technical means, with satellite imagery supporting target validation.

From the outset, almost all the strategic targets, whether they were rail networks, power or command and control centers, or air defense nodes were resident in target folders available to CINCCENT and to the Air Force component of CINCCENT. When we moved to Desert Storm, things went into high gear. Initially, we looked at the strategic targets, including the weapons of mass destruction, delivery systems, large military storage and production facilities, and intelligence headquarters. We concentrated heavily on command-and-control targets, and in this area the national community played a vital role. A "tiger" team of CIA, DIA, and NSA analysts provided timely, accurate targets that contributed substantially to degrading command and control from national leadership to operational-level military commands. The JIC did not have the analytical talent to handle command and control targeting exclusively in theater; as a result, national agency support was crucial.

As we started suppressing strategic targets, we began moving into a battlefield preparation stage. This was true really from the beginning, because the Republican Guard was always one of the strategic components, despite its very tactical nature as a discrete ground operating force.

Midway through the air campaign our orientation became even more tactical. We began battlefield preparation and started looking at frontline defensive units dug in along the Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders with Saudi Arabia and at the mobile heavy reserves that included armored and mechanized units as well as the Republican Guard. As we made this transition, we reprogrammed our collection assets. For example, the Joint Surveillance and Target Acquisition Radar System (JSTARS) initially was used almost exclusively for targeting. As we shifted into a battlefield preparation stage, however, we moved toward developing information about the location of enemy units.

As we suppressed enemy air defenses, we were able to shift our collection activity so that we could use air-borne, air-breathing imagery systems like U-2s and TR-1s with H-cameras and IRIS cameras on board. Those gave us high-resolution imagery to use for planning the ground campaign.

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The Joint Imagery Processing Center (JIPC) allowed for the receipt in theater of timely imagery in response to CINCCENT requirements that otherwise would have been sent through secondary imagery systems from CONUS. This was done by the introduction in theater of a "receive" location and its attendant production and analysis activities. All of this was an effort to rectify real deficiencies in getting imagery in theater.

There was universal agreement in theater that there was a lack of annotated national imagery products to support fighting forces, particularly in the ground war; that imagery received in theater from CONUS would be too late during the war itself; and that there were inadequate imagery resources in theater to perform analysis on products, once we got them. In addition, the lack of adequate secondary dissemination capabilities in theater would preclude the provision of the number of images required. It was felt that we could reduce these problems by bringing in a JIPC. In fact, it helped substantially.

Ground Intelligence

It was hard for the JIC and the rest of the Intelligence Community to keep up with the rapidly evolving ground phase of Desert Storm. Most of the intelligence we had was historical in nature. The exact location of artillery, frontline, and mobile units was important to us for the first 24 hours, and we had that data. But from that point on, we depended heavily on data passed to us from cavalry units, from tactical reconnaissance and from JSTARs and corps-level Side Looking Airborne Radar (SLAR) assets.

Once we moved into the fast-paced ground campaign, ground intelligence collection units were of minimal use in terms of theater needs.

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Tactically, I doubt that our ground tactical intelligence community was able to keep up very well at brigade, division, and even corps level—the pace of combat was too quick. Immediate information of tactical value was not that critical to us at the theater level, and we relied a lot on sound analysis. Competent analysts, who had been studying this problem for months, came up with calls, reaching consensus, always with a minority dissenting opinion, that we were willing to take to the CINC. In almost every case, he bought it. And in almost every case, the analysts were right. They applied sound military judgment along with good training on Iraqi tactical operations, made judgment calls, went out on a limb, and it worked.

HUMINT Operations

Prisoner interrogations also provided extremely useful information. Before the ground campaign started, the coalition took large numbers of Iraqi prisoners, but

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Once we started taking prisoners on our own, however, they were very useful.

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Coalition Intelligence

From a current intelligence point of view, friendly Arab nations made almost no contribution. In many ways,

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(b)(3)(n) By mid-autumn, most of what we needed to know about Iraqi tactical doctrine had been gleaned from [redacted]. There was not much else to be learned about how Saddam's forces operated. I wish we could have learned more about his actual intentions and his will to fight. His tactical doctrine and capabilities were not a secret by Christmas, and I do not believe we gained much of that from our Arab friends.

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[redacted] These people were top quality; the imagery interpreters were usually highly experienced and competent. The US military tends to promote its best tactical imagery interpreters out of their analytical role, while our allies seem to leave their good people in these roles for a much greater part of their careers.

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Critical Issues

BDA and Iraqi order of battle are touchy issues. We did not depend wholly on the Intelligence Community for ground OB BDA because it was unwilling to make an assessment based on anything other than imagery. National-level imagery could not see many of the kills effected by cluster bombs and other modern munitions.

We relied on admittedly subjective military judgment to make calls, because, in the CINC's own words, "If we had to rely on the national community, we would never have started the ground war." And I am not sure that our in-theater assets were all that much better. You could not get better resolution imagery from an RF-4 or Tornado to determine whether or not a D-30 artillery piece was destroyed. We had to make estimates based on judgment calls by people who understood munition effects.

Once again, the CINC bought it, and it is fortunate that he did. I guess his instincts were good here, because I was doubtful for a long time.

In determining BDA on Scuds, we did not rely heavily on pilot reports. Pilots were notoriously optimistic on the Scud kills, and I would not even make an estimate on what we actually got there.

Iraqi OB estimates were directly related to BDA. If you are talking about total numbers of Iraqi troops lined up on the equipment that made up the OB, I would say that our estimates were high. We would all have to presume that we could have done better there.

In my judgment, we did not have a good grasp of the psychology of the Iraqi soldier. We never understood that his willingness to fight was limited substantially by a number of factors unknown to us.

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[redacted] We did not get a sense of the Iraqi will to fight until we had taken prisoners.

OB estimates were a interesting part of what we did. We carried 42 Iraqi divisions with full equipment. We estimated that those divisions were at about 70-percent personnel strength on 15 January 1991 and at about 50-percent strength once the ground war started.

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Value of National-level Intelligence

The initial breaching or ground assault operations were based on national-level imagery that helped us lay down the exact location of obstacles and of units, right down to individual artillery pieces and infantry fighting positions. That kind of historical data was crucial to the success of the operation.

Satellite imagery was helpful for BDA, especially for damage on such strategic targets

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CENTCOM's Use of Intelligence

Before and during Desert Storm, CINCENT relied heavily on his J-2. Just as important, the CINC trusted his own judgment and superb battle instincts. The term "warrior" in the military is overused, but if ever there was someone with warrior instincts, it was General Schwarzkopf. He had a good feel for whether or not he was being told what he needed to hear, and he did a good job of winnowing out that which was useful from that which was not.

Schwarzkopf did not make an operational decision without conferring with the J-2. The J-2, Brig. Gen. Jack Leide, or myself were virtually face to face with him daily during every important military decision he made for 45 days straight.

J-2 and J-3 functions were thoroughly integrated. The Joint Operations Center, which was next door to the CINC's war room and contiguous to the JIC, had six JIC members. They were not there as liaison officers but to work for the current operations chief inside the Joint Operations Center to make certain that the latest intelligence was always available. Anything of any value that devolved in the JIC was immediately placed on a TV monitor as a highlight, side by side with an operations video display.

The JIC was always able to communicate intelligence assessments to the CENTCOM staff. They would be willing to take any assessment we gave them, and they were willing to accept anything that looked like it had reasonable judgment applied to it and was a professional product.

There were times, however, when the operators would question what we were doing. For example, they would argue about our apportionment of collection assets. Still, they accepted our analytical products. There was near-universal agreement that the Iraqis had one hell of a BW/CW capability and that they were willing to use it, that there could be CW warheads on the Scuds, and that the Iraqis would fight hard—especially the Guard units.

Personal and Inter-service Relations

Throughout his career, General Schwarzkopf's relationships with intelligence officers have been somewhat ambivalent. When I was his division G-2, I would like to think that I had a certain credibility, but I was a G-2 in an infantry division in peacetime and there is a world of difference between that and what we were doing in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. When I arrived in Riyadh, I had not seen General Schwarzkopf in 6 years, and it was not like old home week. I would say that our former working relationship had little to do with whatever credibility I had with him, but I believe it was there.

General Leide's credibility with General Schwarzkopf was quite high. If Leide was willing to go out on a limb, Schwarzkopf listened to him. But personal relationships, by and large, were important in this sense. If the CINC liked you, it was because professionally you were pretty good. You had to know what you were doing or you did not last long. He zeroed you out of the decision process; you were not a player, if you could not give him what he needed to fight the war.

I do not know of any inter-service rivalries that got in the way of CINCENT's mission. When I arrived, it was clear that we were getting ready to go into a shooting war, and Americans were going to die. Inter-service rivalries were put on a shelf, and they pretty much stayed there until the war was over.

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Evaluating The JIC

The degree of competence in the JIC was high. We had exceptional analysts, who really understood their subject. The level of expertise among the reserve officers was much more than I expected. In peacetime, many of these officers are civilians in the national intelligence community. They knew how to reach out to the agencies that sent them; they could matrix into those organizations and dig out data that we needed to make good, solid analytical judgments.

Dealing with BDA caused the most difficulties for the JIC. We had to apply far too much subjectivity, and at first we did not have a lot of confidence that what we were doing was right. Towards the end, that changed and our level of confidence was quite high.

Another problem with the JIC was that, despite the fact that we had an Imagery Processing Center, it was difficult to get adequate, timely, overhead imagery of sufficient resolution to permit immediate targeting, especially against tactical targets. A-10 and F-16 pilots who were bombing from 12,000 feet needed imagery that showed them battalion lay-downs of artillery, armor, and mechanized vehicles. And they needed it before the Iraqis shifted location. It was not a JIC problem; it was an imagery distribution problem, as much as anything, and that is a lesson learned, something that we have to look at with an eye to future improvement.

(b)(1) I wish that CIA had been a little more willing to talk
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tantalize with intimations of intentions but without any real depth. We were getting so much on capabilities and so little on intentions that the dichotomy was obvious to anybody who looked at it for very long. And that angered the CINC a lot. CIA was willing to talk about BDA, and release numbers with comments, but it was not willing to make a judgment call on top of that as to whether or not the numbers were realistic. Its reliance on those numbers without being willing to make a follow-up assessment bothered us. Perhaps military assessments were not CIA business—in which case they should have stayed completely away from them rather than deal themselves only part way into the game.

Another of the JIC's problems stemmed from the fact that it had to mature quickly from a small organization before Christmas to an enormous one after

Christmas. It was almost a bigger management problem than we wanted to tackle. Communications are always a problem; at the theater level they were not so bad for us, but at the operational level, at corps and below, there were problems. For the Intelligence Community, the need for dedicated intelligence communications is one of the lessons learned from this conflict.

It would have been nice to have an automated collection management and processing capability. We did not have anything that allowed us to correlate OB data onto a computer graphic that could be manipulated, that could have some decision tree associated with it, that would be an analytical tool. We were grease-pencil-on-acetate kinds of OB people, but it worked.

Future JICs

Several things could be done now to facilitate the smooth and rapid deployment of future JICs. The Defense Intelligence Reorganization Act has the services combining all their production facilities, reducing their scope and delegating a lot of that to the JICs at Unified and Specified (U&S) commands. This is important. Each of the combatant U&S commands will have its own JIC. And each of those JICs should be in a go-to-war mode. They should train that way; they should bring their reservists on active duty for major exercises. Computer war games should have a level of resolution in the intelligence side of the house that truly tasks the JICs. That is one of the problems with war games—not enough of them have the level of resolution necessary to do it. One of the lessons learned from this war was that collection management is an immense problem. Most war games do not even begin to approximate the difficulties one has dealing with all the various collection systems that are in theater, how to coordinate them and orchestrate them.

I do not believe that JICs are ever going to be as large as combatant commanders need them in a wartime mode. And that is where the reserve components play an important role. The national intelligence agencies should have permanent representatives in JICs, to assist in bringing these organizations up to wartime footing.

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An Admonition

General Schwarzkopf's ambivalence towards the national agencies stemmed from a perception of their unwillingness to provide the detailed support that he wanted on capabilities and intentions, to provide timely copies of satellite imagery, and to be willing to engage in more subjective assessments in the BDA area. Future CINCs will be likely to expect such support from the Intelligence Community.

Now, the national community, in particular CIA, may say, "Not my job, man. I'm not supposed to be laying down operational- and tactical-level military capabilities." The problem was that was not the way the CINC saw it: CIA did make those kinds of assessments from time to time in a minor way. BDA: "Hey, let's go to the President and tell him that only 385 Iraqi tanks are dead and that means that you really only knocked down two of his divisions. CINCCENT said there are over 1,200 of them dead, and that's way off the mark." That actually happened, and that is not good enough. It was a back-handed assessment.

I do not believe CIA should be in the business of projecting intentions at the operational level of war. But, as I said earlier, if you are going to go, you need to go all the way. You need to ask yourself, "After all the bombing, and there are only 385 tanks dead, what are we doing wrong? And if, in fact, the level of effectiveness is greater than that, what could it be? And if only 385 tanks are dead, what are the enemy's intentions?" I am not sure we ever saw that sort of thing. I refer to intentions in a sense of "is he going to defend, delay, withdraw, attack? Where? If so, what strength? When?"

Despite what I have said about this issue, the fact remains that it was only a single problem—one easily sorted out in the future—among literally hundreds of CIA and Intelligence Community success stories. In this context, CINCCENT told the world that his intelligence support was the best that any theater commander had ever enjoyed. I know that to be a fact.

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